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ABSTRACT

Women and men experience illiteracy differently, with the inability to read and write often leaving women marginalized and powerless. Therefore, women need support groups in literacy programs. A literacy support group model for use in Edmonton, Alberta, is presented as a viable means to empower women who are marginalized in society mainly because of illiteracy. The model is based on the power of friendship and support for one another through the social experience of sharing personal stories as a means of understanding their experiences, finding their own voices, and raising their self-esteem. Narratives are used as a way for the participants to make sense of their lives and empower themselves to become literate. An attempt was made to start a women's literacy support group for offenders and ex-offenders at the Edmonton John Howard Society, but because of scheduling conflicts, lack of support from the institution, and communication barriers, the group did not succeed. (Contains 16 references.) (KC)

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LITERACY AND EMPOWERMENT: WOMEN TELLING THEIR STORIES

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Literacy and empowerment : women telling their stories
By Joanie Parker

> We are all prisoners of our ignorance. By opening new worlds of information and ideas for us , literacy is one of the chief means of human liberation
>
> Pattison - 1982

Most of us seldom think about our own literacy nor do we even remember how we learned to read and write when we were children. We have grown up knowing that we have these skills and as a result we have a sense of dignity and confidence in ourselves. Although we may take our own literacy for granted we cannot remain unaware of other people in society who have not experienced success in becoming readers and writers and who find themselves labelled as illiterate. Smith (1988) points out that throughout the world the majority of victims of illiteracy are women who for a number of reasons such as poverty, lack of encouragement and low self esteem have dropped out of school and have never continued to develop skills in reading or writing. But Smith continues to explain that "... in Canada, if we use completion of grade 9 as a benchmark (as suggested by UNESCO) to define functional illiteracy the numbers are about the same for both men and women..." (p. 26). However, according to Smith (1988) men and women experience illiteracy in very different ways.

Literacy has become a universal public concern for all of us . But it is a special and personal concern for the non-literate women who struggle to maintain a sense of belonging and usefulness as mothers, wives and wage earners within a print oriented literate society. Many of these women have feelings of failure and inadequacy. They often feel a sense of dependency and powerlessness or as women marginalized and without voice. They sometimes feel imprisoned within a culture of their own silence.

It is the purpose of this paper to briefly describe some of the differences in the way

illiteracy affects men and women and to show a very real need for women's groups in literacy programs. I will present a model in the form of a literacy support group which could serve as a viable means to empower women who are marginalized in society mainly because of illiteracy. This model is based on the power of friendship and support for one another through the social experience of sharing personal stories about themselves as a means of understanding their experiences, finding their own voice and raising their self-esteem. The model has also been planned to include a number of personal development strategies that have been suggested by authors of resources designed to help women in need of improving conditions in their lives.

The term "literacy" is interpreted in different ways by different groups of people. The meaning we give to the state of being literate determines the kind of programs we organize to help illiterate members of society to become literate. According to **Webster's Collegiate Dictionary** literacy is "the ability to read and write." While I will use the term "literacy" to describe the ability to read and write at a grade 9 level, I will also extend the meaning to include notions such as consciousness raising, liberation and empowerment. To use the term "literacy" in this broader sense I have drawn on the some of the work of Robert Pattison (1982) and Paulo Freire (1996).

The Proposed Model

The model I will describe is one that was planned for a group of women at the Edmonton John Howard Society (EJHS). The original intention was to begin this group during the month of March. However, the plan could not be implemented at that time due to an insufficient number of women who could not fit the program into their present schedules. Because of the delay in implementing the actual women's group at the John Howard Society, I will discuss similar models of literacy groups for women which have been successful and therefore hold possibilities for other groups. I will also describe the planned proposal and possible outcomes for the original support group

that would have been implemented at the Edmonton John Howard Society.

ILLITERATE WOMEN IN A LITERATE SOCIETY

Stromquist, (1990) points out that when most literacy programs are described or planned the distinctions between men and women are rarely taken into consideration. When programs do concentrate on women, the tendency is to stress the traditional roles of women as wives and mothers. Literacy learning tends to focus on functional reading and writing that is considered within the realm of a woman's experience and special needs. For example, reading and writing exercises may involve recipes and directions for child care and family planning.

Although the intention of giving women a meaningful and purposeful reason for learning to read and write is a reasonable one; it raises a concern about the kind of message we are conveying to them concerning the purpose of becoming literate, especially if these practical reasons are the only kind of reading and writing they do. If our goal for literacy for women is one of knowledge and empowerment we need to include in our literacy programs opportunities for these women to discover reading and writing as recreation and learning and as a means to thinking critically about what they are learning and experiencing. It is my belief that reflection and critical thinking are the first steps to changing beliefs and to changing one's situation.

The Barriers to Literacy

Poverty and gender inequity are two important factors that affect women's lives. According to Smith (1988) only 25% of functionally illiterate women are in the paid labour force compared with 50% of women as a whole...Jobs available to women with poor reading and writing skills are traditonally the lowest paid jobs - such as domestic work, sewing machine operation....The average woman of any educational status who

works full time makes only 68% of what the average man makes. Women with less than grade 8 make on average only 59% of what men earn (p. 27).

It is interesting to note that according to Stromquist (1990) the poor do not consider literacy a top priority in their lives. They are caught up in living day-to-day and trying to survive with very little money (p. 107). And even when they are aware of the benefits of returning to school the realities of the financial constraints often prevent women from pursuing a goal of learning to read and write, let alone the dream of obtaining further education.

Poverty, gender inequity, victims of inequity in the school system and workplace, disintegration of family and violence against women are some of the barriers women have had to face which have prevented them from enrolling in literacy programs. From my experience as a teacher of adults I have observed many women who are burdened with heavy family responsibilities such as children and extended family members to care for, along with stress of husbands who are unemployed and sometimes abusive. Many of these women lack support and encouragement from their friends and families. Yet when women can overcome some of these barriers and find the courage to begin a journey of learning and personal development they acquire a strong sense of accomplishment and self worth.

Stromquist (1990) reminds us that programs for women's literacy must balance the interests, skills and knowledge that women seek and need with opportunities for them to build self confidence and control over their own learning. The experience of growing and the power to be in control of one's own situation is unknown to women who have grown up illiterate. And so those of us faced with the responsibility of planning "literacy programs must go beyond nutrition, health and family planning and move into consciousness-raising and mobilization" (107). As Bashin remarks, women need knowledge "not so much to read and understand the world but to read,

understand and control their world" (p.107).

Those women who do enter literacy programs do so for a variety of reasons. Some are looking for employment , some wan't to become more involved in their children's education even if it is only to read stories to their children while others desire literacy for their own growth and development. But whatever the reason many women find themselves in a position where they don't have the money, the time or the encouragement to enroll in a literacy program.

Although Literacy is a universal problem it is also personal. According to Jurmo (1987) the reasons for adults being in a state of illiteracy are very diverse and individual. Jurmo strongly puts forth the notion that while the development in learners of efficient reading and writing skills is desirable, it is not in itself an adequate goal for literacy programs (p. 20). What he is suggesting is that literacy programs include an emphasis on the development of confidence and self esteem so that learners have an opportunity to regain a sense of belonging and control over solving everyday problems in their life situations. He would support Freire's notion of consciousness raising and breaking the culture of silence that surrounds them.

LITERACY AND EMPOWERMENT

Historically the words "literate" and "literacy" have held various meanings over time. One of the characteristics of literacy is that it is ever changing. Pattison, (1982). He argues that the term literacy has broad significance and that "literacy is a mechanical ability with the technologies of language coupled with consciousness of language as a force in human affairs." Even though some societies may choose to use literacy differently , one fact is always constant and that is " literacy is always connected with power." For Pattison literacy is much more than mechanical skill in reading and writing . " It is a potent form of consciousness" (Preface).

Paulo Freire (1996) also believes that literacy is more than reading the word, it also means reading the world. This is a very important concept for the women in the literacy group I have planned. Freire is addressing the broader definition of reading and pointing out the need to engage in critical thinking about what is being read. For Freire, the notion of critical consciousness involves the ability to analyze and ask questions which affect the "sociopolitical, economic, and cultural realities that shape our lives (p. 199). Freire believes that "praxis" and "dialogioue" are central to the struggle for the process of transformative power to take place. "Praxis" as used by Freire " refers to the relationship between theoretical understanding and critique of society (that is its historical, ideological, sociopolitical, and economic influences and structures) and action that seems to transform individuals and their environments" (p.199).

Freire believes that the process of learning and knowing requires dialogue. It is through dialogue in the way it is used by Freire that people can break the spell of silence and find their voice. Freire in his work in Brazil and other Third World countries makes explicit how the culture of silence is the social matrix in which people become powerless and without the opportunity to be heard by others.

POWER OF STORY AS A WAY OF KNOWING

Margaret Meek (1991) points out that "If we are to understand the relation of storytelling to literacy we must see the value and nature of narrative as a means by which human beings, everywhere, represent and structure their world" (p.103). Stories are everywhere; they are universal. No matter what country or culture the traditions, values and beliefs are passed down from one generation to the next through the sharing of stories. But storytelling has another dimension in helping the teller to structure or make sense of their worlds. As we recall incidents and express

our memories and feelings about these incidents we are remembering , thinking and beginning to see these things differently.

Much has been written about the power of telling and listening to personal experience story narratives as a means of understanding experience (Stahl 1983), (Bruner 1986). Stahl, (1983) says personal experience stories "are first person narratives usually composed orally by the tellers and based on real incidents in their lives" (p.268). One of the strategies we planned to use in the women's literacy group at the John Howard Society was to encourage women to recall and to share their childhood memories of early school experiences in the form of personal narratives as a way of helping them to make sense of their present situations.

Narrative and Psychotherapy

Using storytelling as a way of understanding experience has been practiced by many psychotherapists who have recounted case histories of their neurological patients and how they encouraged patients to tell their stories. Oliver Sacks a professor of clinical neurology In **The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat** (1970) tells many stories of patients who have lost their memory and as a result become the victims of cruelty and ridicule and yet they are able to use narrative in meaningful ways to recount and begin to understand their experiences (p 181).

The theories of Jerome Brunner (1986) support the idea of constructing narratives as a means of making sense of incidents. He describes two wholly separate different forms of mind which are the paradigmatic or logico- scientific and the narrative mode. The narrative mode Bruner says , "is one of the ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality". Bruner says that both modes of understanding are important and both coming to live side by side especially as we " move toward an understanding of what is involved in telling and understanding great stories and how it is that stories create a reality of their own." (pp 42-43) If psychotherapists have found the power of stories effective in the treatment of their patients then I believe the same can apply to women who have been silenced in their communities and the workplace.

Personal Narratives as a Means of Finding Voice

Most people acknowledge the fact that women have more difficulty in asserting authority or conducting themselves in the face of authority than boys or men. Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) describes how many celebrated womens' lives have been shaped and directed by a male dominated culture . This has influenced women's experiences and shaped the way they see themselves which is evident in the stories they tell . Heilbrun believes that women have for too long been deprived of their own narratives. If those narratives are to be found, she says . it will be "where women exchange stories, where they read and talk collectively of ambitions, of possibilities, and accomplishments" (p.46).

The Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF) decided in 1990 that young women also have endured a culture of silence during their adolescent years and that they also had been deprived of their narratives. CTF recognized the need for teenage women to tell their stories collectively. **A Capppella** (1990) is a report of the CTF project designed " to accurately and sensitively document the major concerns and perceptions of adolescent women in their own words" (p. 1). "A Cappella" seemed an appropriate title for this project as the foreword to the report suggests that " young women in Canada today are living 'a cappella', and for the most part their song is not being heard" (p. 1) CTF recruited 139 teacher / leaders in all the provinces and territories to lead discussion groups of young women ranging in age from 11 to 19. **A Cappella** (1990) provides a startling picture of what it means to be a teenage woman in Canada today. For instance , 79 percent of them feel that such threats as pollution and nuclear war are robbing them of their future. Many of them see a bleak future that includes poverty and relationships that end in divorce, abuse or sexually transmitted disease. These young women inhabit a world of fear and uncertainty.

The stories told by these young women confirm what Heilbrun (1988) has pointed out that, " Youth is less a time of hope than uncertainty, at worse a time of depression" (p.5) But she also warns that, " we must recognize what the past suggests: women are well beyond youth when they begin unconsciously, to create another story." (p. 5) For the women in the John Howard society who would have been participants in the model project contained in this paper these women would have created a similar story, yet in many ways a very different story than the ones they

would have told in their youth. The stories adult women create may be very dismal unless we take the stories of teenage women seriously and act upon them.

A Cappella was a group of young women who came together to tell their stories but these young women's problems did not stem from illiteracy. Their stories were quite different from the stories told by another group of women who were illiterate and came together to form a discussion group in Toronto under the leadership of McBeath & Stollmeyer (1987). McBeath & Stollmeyer found it difficult to form a group of women at the community-based reading centre for adults because of the barriers many of these women faced. Their hectic schedules, working full time, looking after children and other family members, doing houseld chores, cooking, cleaning etc. prevented them from being able to find time to participate in the women's literacy group. Of the 40 women learners in the program only six were able to attend regularly.

The background of these six women who did attend held many similarities. They were childless and had been labelled mentally retarded in childhood so they had never entered the work force. When the group first met they spent a lot of time talking about their childhood experiences and writing down their stories. They didn't have a set plan rather the group evolved as it went along. As the group continued to meet one of the women thought she would like to write a book about her life. Since she couldn't write many words, she dictated the story to another member of the group. In her story she referred to the traumatic experiences growing up with a father who beat her unrelentlessly. Through the support of the group Rose was able to tell her own story and as a result the group thought it would be useful to turn the book into a play as well. Rose became more confident as a result of putting on the play and casting other members in the group to play different parts and from this it was realized by those running the group that "breaking the silence about abuse and violence is part of the process of becoming literate for many adults" (p 53).

This is only one example of several stories told by the group. The group grew to include a single parent who was working and they continued to discuss issues such as daycare, the family, health issues and sex. One of the women who had not been sterilized became pregnant and she too decided to write a book.

This is an example of a group of illiterate women coming together and telling their stories. There was no preconceived plan, the incidents came together as they responded and told their stories to each other. McBeth and Stollmeyer, (1987) go on

to say that "For many women, literacy does not start with instruction. It starts with getting things that prevent learning out in the open and out of the way: the ugly, debilitating memories, the lack of social and economic supports, and the years of being told, over and over until you believe it, that you can't learn" (p 55).

THE EDMONTON JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY LITERACY GROUP

The discussion group at the East End Literacy community-based reading centre for adults is not unlike the group that would have been set up in Edmonton at the John Howard Society (EJHS). Originally the idea for the group came about to try to fulfill some of the needs of the women attending programs at the John Howard Society. It was open to women who are, or have been, involved with the Edmonton John Howard Society's PLUS Program (Progressive Learning with US) an adult literacy program. This is a program for clients to enhance their reading and writing skills as they work with trained volunteer tutors, OAP (Opportunity Avenues Program) an education program where clients can develop their educational, personal and work-related skills, and the CLUB (a drop-in centre).

The idea for the group was initiated at the first meeting of the Advisory Group of the PLUS project of a publication of writings and drawings by the EJHS clients. Some of the goals for the group which were discussed at preliminary meetings in the original proposal were as follows:

- To serve as a support system for women learners
- To create an avenue to voice and address concerns and issues of women
- To learn skills and acquire information beyond personal literacy and academic objectives;
- To promote the active use of and create ownership of the PLUS Resource Centre;
- To establish and foster an opportunity for participants to accept themselves as contributors of knowledge and skills;
- To create an atmosphere that encourages empowerment through active participation and decision-making

We would begin the first session by trying to create an atmosphere of warmth and trust. We would have lots of food, tea and coffee and begin the session with an icebreaker (something fun). We would also invite a guest speaker, someone who had

been involved in a similar kind of support group to share her experiences. Anticipating that some of the women may be shy we would have the guest speaker talk first to help put the participants at ease in expressing their ideas. Then we would brainstorm ideas for the kind of support group everyone would like. One way to do this would be to have everyone write their ideas on cards, put them on the wall, and identify patterns of popular possible activities. The choice of agendas and activities will evolve when the group meets. It is hoped that the group will meet once a week at EJHS in the PLUS Resource Centre.

Concluding Remarks

We feel that this proposal for a women's support group within a literacy program is an interesting and exciting plan. There is sufficient theory and models of similar support groups that have been successful to serve as a guide for the John Howard proposal to succeed. Some of the women who may have attended the group were probably facing similar barriers to those of the Toronto group. The main reason the project didn't get off the ground at this time was that the women who were finally contacted couldn't fit this program into their present schedules. However, they were enthusiastic about the idea and felt they would like to join when it was a better time for them. But it wasn't only the women who faced certain barriers.

We also encountered several barriers in trying to set up the project . Due to the very nature of the clients who were offenders and women at risk of offending this required the need for increased security. As a result, we had difficulty in contacting the clients directly. I was not allowed to phone any of these women myself. It was also difficult to cross boundries within the organization. Internally the doors were locked so it was difficult to move freely. At the EJHS information was not openly shared often due to fear of breaking confidentiality. The organizational culture is a top-down model which encourages departmentalization and chain reporting in a hierarchical fashion. People are not able to freely communicate and the women who were contacted were contacted through someone else.

Another factor which may have contributed to the project not succeeding at this time was that perhaps our focus was too narrow. We had only considered asking women from three programs in the EJHS. We found it difficult to extend invitations to other groups for various reasons but we had also been limiting the group of women to

offenders, ex-offenders or women at risk of offending.

Further Implementations

As a result, we are now looking into possibilities of extending the support group to include others such as wives, mothers, girlfriends and daughters of offenders who also need support.

Many of the activities and exercises we might have used were from the Women's Self-Help Handbook (Volumes One & Two). They offer excellent suggestions that would help women become more self aware, self assertive, improve self-esteem, reduce stress and so on. The handbook is based on the 'popular education method' developed by Paulo Freire. This method begins with the person's experience and what the person needs to know rather than being imposed on from an outside source. Therefore, the content is derived from the concerns, issues and experiences of the group, not the facilitator. "The basic principles of this method make it an ideal approach for working with women experiencing isolation and feeling powerless. These principles effect both the participants and the facilitators" (p.7). Participants and facilitators are seen as equal in a relationship of dialogue.

The handbbook provides basic information on how to set up and facilitate groups, opening and closing exercises, ways to get the group to identify and analyze common concerns and issues and learn the skills needed to make changes that lead to solutions. Developing listening, communication and problem solving skills are emphasized as well as ways to deal with feelings and situations of conflict. They provide 31 examples of what to do in certain situations. For example,

WHAT TO DO IF THERE IS CONFLICT IN THE GROUP?

EXAMPLE: Conflict can be caused by prior experiences between participants, unresolved conflicts form earlier meetings, power struggles, prejudices, etc. It is sometimes difficut to determine where the conflict is coming from.

WHAT TO DO: Group members can educate themselves about group dynamics and thus try to spot problems before they pile up. Popular education techniques will help

people to look at and accept individual differences. (p. 46, vol 1)

The handbook also includes exercises in trust building, making effective changes, developing values and goals, visualizations/affirmations, and a variety of ways in which the group can communicate their experiences. For example, drawing can be used in many different ways. An example of a drawing exercise is the following:

HISTORICAL TIME-LINE EXERCISE

PURPOSE: to help clarify where a group is going, what its objectives are
- to help a group clarify interpersonal and organizational problems by representing past events and linking them to the present and future.
Time: 60 minutes

MATERIAL: Paper or newsprint, markers and tape

PROCEDURE:
1. Each person draws her own map of the development of the group, project, course or situation in question.
2. A wall or floor is covered with paper so that the group can now construct a collective map. The person who has the most past events on her map can start the drawing. The group can then continue to give her ideas and events or individual members can add as they think of things.
3. After the drawing is completed the group discusses it critically, going through the three phases of problem-posing: description, analysis and relation.
Note: This process can also serve to review a group's history, introduce new people or help the group discover new information. (p 33 vol. 1)

Sharing Stories

Another excellent way to get the group to communicate their feelings and experiences is through the power of story telling. This is the main focus of the group having women tell their stories in the hopes of empowering them to act and improve their condition. There are many other examples of women coming together telling their stories. M.F.

Belenky et al (1986) look at the stories of many women whose experience with males, often their father and brothers, "were supposed to remain in a position of silence and servitude." (p.52) One such story was that of Inez a Columbian-American women of thirty who told a story of a young woman who was trapped in a world of "belittling external authorities" As Inez found her voice her world began to change. She arrived at a new conception of truth " as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited." This discovery of intuition or "subjective truth" was the most personally " liberating event" of her life. Why is story telling such a liberating force?

Narrative as meaning making implies much more than just telling stories for amusement or pleasure . The story reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world. Barbara Hardy(1977) , speaking of narrative, argues that narrative " like lyric or dance, is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate, and order experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life" (p.12) . Hardy has shown how narrative is so important to our lives:

> For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate,hope despair, believe, doubt, play, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future (13).

As we encourage other women to share their personal narratives of their lives and to discover their own voice we in turn will strengthen our own. But clearly our own literacy as life-long learners and writers is a very different kind of literacy than we can hope for the illiterate women who come to the Edmonton John Howard Society women's group.We have never experienced the feelings of devastation or isolation and failure because of illiteracy. For we have lived a life-time as "insiders" in a print-oriented literate society. This of course is not to say that everyone who cannot read and write experienced these feelings but I imagine many do. It is doubtful that we can duplicate in them the confidence we possess from our early successes with literacy.

However, we can encourage them to grow in skills, knowledge and their development of self-esteem as we work together.

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